

Masked Darkness

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Summary: Come on. Think. Don't close your eyes, Raise that rifle. Finger on trigger. This is it. My time to shine...

## 1. One, Digression

Darkness. Come on. Get ready. It's time.

A slither of light, like a knife cutting through dark. Eyes heave open. Two gaping holes in the mask merge into one. Troops run ahead; SAS soldiers hunched over, scurrying along like beetles, or ants—those two glass eyes darting around the place, antennae gun waving in front. Ready your own M4. Ignore the rattle of your packs, pockets, greades, spare ammo; ignore the weight, the uncomfortable chafing feeling the straps give you. Imagine you're just in practice; Hawaiian shirt loosely hanging above some greasy jeans, automatic grasped casually.

The crackle of the radio starting up sounds like napalm.

\_Tna 1, come in Tna 1 this is Mother. Get your ass in gear, over.\_

The napalm fades. He can almost imagine its orange haze drifting high above silhouetted jungle. Burning the ants. He's never been there but he watched Apocalypse Now.

"You OK?" says a firm hand clasped around his shoulder. He turns to see a gas mask like his own; in fact, he sees a reflection in a glass circle. They're the same.

"Uhâ€¦| sorry sir. First day," he lies. The officer stares for a second; trying to fix the voice to something; but all he can see is the mask, so he nods sharply and moves on. He sighs relief.

\_Just a job, \_he thinks. \_Just a goddamn job.\_ He straightens his back, hears bone click. Hunches over again. Down. Bent knees, rifle

poking out, grasped in-between two hands. A rookie jogs in front; he can tell because the guy looks excited. He shouldn't be. People die all the time- they're not supposed to, there's safety training, statistics that say otherwise- but he's witnessed it. People die all the time, and it's just a fucking job. \_Just a job. \_These are armed terrorists; formidable enemies. People are going to die.

But he'll be fucked if it's going to be him.

Legs move by themselves, but he feels the ache. He can hear the respirator suck air in through tiny holes, an unpleasant sound, like a blocked nose. His lungs inhale the second hand air. He's panting now, as his boots crunch on something broken. A familiar glove obscures his vision for a moment; finger rubbing the grimy glass. He remembers with a feeling of idiocy that his eyes are \_inside \_the mask. Legs really hurting now.

\_Fire in the hole! \_sounds against fiery napalm. This time he sees it, in the distance; that haze of heat and fire swirling upwards into black smoke. It's accompanied by the sound of gunfire; rapid bursts echoing far away, hollow and distant, not like the movies. He tells himself it's real; deadly little bullets zapping past ears and shoulders, but it doesn't register. It soundsâ€¦ fake. Like on TV; the news; urban warfare.

He's stopped running. They all have; his squad. Five people, all hiding behind masks.

\_You can't hide from bullets.\_

He checks his 'nades again; two flash, one HE. Feels behind; Defuse Kit ready. Left hand runs over metal chunks; three clips and a USP pistol. He hates the word pistol; sounds light and playful. Not at all a death dealing machine.

"Tna 1, take the point." The radio cuts off just as he realises that's him. He inhales. Rifle up; sights aliened. His feet crunch forward slowly; a sneaking pace. Passes allies; they're leaning, crouching, aiming still; all eyes on him. Leader up ahead; points to the large, open doorway. This is it.

He looks through. Can't see shit. Darkness.

\_People die.\_

Oh fuck it, he thinks, and sprints into the unknown.

## 2. Two, Cautiousness

Darkness. Completely fucking black. He yearns to flick his torch on; illuminate the dark like water gushing into a sinking ship, but he's terrified. Something pulls and twists at his guts; a tense feeling that someone's watching him, or at least, watching the darkness - poised to shoot at the slightest hint of movement. So instead, he creeps blindly- squinting through steamy goggles.

Stretching an arm out, he feels boxes; cardboard, stacked together messily. His eyes are adjusting, but there's very little to see. Either he's in a tight corridor, or there are some big-ass crates to

his right. Looking up, he sees nothing; just a void that makes his feet sink and his head dizzy. Eyes strain and a hint of metal can be seen. Feet kick against discarded packaging, like wading through a swamp of cardboard and Clingfilm.

A corner. Back straightened, against the wall, M4 pointing at the ground, head sideways. Get readyâ€| breathe. Very. Slowly.

Peek.

One eye slips around- a single glass monocle. Can't. See. Shit. He brings his head back; like resurfacing from water, taking a deep breath. Feeling behind; yes, he brought them, the nightvision goggles in his back pouch. Raising both arms, he feels the gasmask straps on the back of his head; undoes one, it snaps free, the mask jerking forwards. Next one comes loose, his other hand lowering the mask from his face.

He exhales pleausurably; now he can breathe on his own again. Dropping the mask to the ground (that was stupid; luckily didn't make much noise), he brings both hands up to feel his face. Cold gloves touch warm, sticky, sweaty skin. Freedom, though not for long. The goggles are pulled up, the familiar feel of a rubber strap against hair, the elasticised snap he's used to when the goggles rush to meet your eyes. Everything is green. Same man, different mask.

He tries again, this time feeling cold air against his cheeks as he darts round. He sees more crates, wrapped in Clingfilm, a strange green highlight through the goggle's filters. There's a walkway that circles the warehouse walls; a few men lining it. Quick button press, and he's zoomed in on one. They're armed- AK47 rifles, few grenades, too. All wearing balaclavas. Must be five, maybe six, scattered around. Seems like there's an office on one of the walkways, overlooking the rest of the site.

The hostages must be there.

A sudden crackle; it's the radio coming to life. He instantly falls back, crouches down; hands covering the device, muffling the sound. There's fucking terrorists here- why didn't he turn his radio off?

\_Comâ€™n, Tna, what----situation----oming in! â€™ver\_

He squeezes the damn thing, leaning over to it, hissing through gritted teeth to \_stay the fuck out.\_ But it's too late. He looks back- through the green haze of nightvision he sees a strip of light appear, and a green silhouette of an SAS member rushing forward, through the doorway. Cursing, he puts out one hand, signalling to stay the fuck away, but it's too late.

They've heard.

### 3. Three, Conflict

Inside the warehouse, gunfire is deafening. Hundreds of high pitched bangs so fast they overlap, a war zone of noise that scars your ears- leaving them ringing. He's pressed against something sturdy,

breathing hard, chest pushing out against tight straps when he pants. It's stopped. The silence is almost as bad as the gunfire to his defeated ears. At least they're safe. The warehouse wall is opposite; now with some thin beams of light leaking through the new bullet holes. Looks otherworldly, like some strange alien dream, through the green filter of the nightvision goggles. Looking behind; a huge, corrugated storage crate. The other four of his squad leaning against it too; crouching, tense.

\_This isn't going so well\_.

He hears shouting. They need to act, and fast. Casually flashing a hand signal to his squad, he slides a flashbang from his pouch, pulls the pin, lobs it round the corner. Closes his eyes. Waits.

As he hears the thunderous bang, he's already on his feet. He dashes into the open, into the firing range, while the wailing of a thousand cats rips through his head. Legs beat against the hard ground, straining to run as fast as possible. Where to? Forward. Don't stop. Don't think. Don't you dare look around. The M4 rifle rubs his arms, it's heavy and awkward, but he pushes on. Stairs. Head for the stairs. The stabbing pain in your muscles will disappear if you can just make it that little bit moreâ€¦|

Throwing himself to the ground, he can hear again, and there's more gunfire. Whether it's just started, or he was running through it and didn't notice, he doesn't know. Looking back into the warehouse, he sees a canvas of smeared green, in different shades and contrasts. He rips off the nightvision goggles, throwing them to the ground and looks again. His squad have engaged, the stupid bastards. Over the faint rustling of the radio, he hears their taunts, orders, screams; watches through stinging eyes as they die. Two down. Three down. Gunfire shreds through boxes, sending scraps of card into the air like confetti. Blood. All gone.

Shit. He can't move, frozen in fear. They're dead; all of them. He can see the bodies strewn across the floor, lying in their own blood, sharing the space with the storage boxes. Did he do that? Was his recklessness somewhat inspirational to them? He knows what he's been told to think; work as a team, be like one, move together. So probably yes. And now he's alone.

Calling for help crossed his mind. Screaming into that little black box, pleading for backup, for his mummy. But he's had a far more illogical revelation. They think he's dead. In the confusion that followed after he threw the flashbang and blinded any fools who were looking, he ran onwards, unnoticed, before those bastards slaughtered his team. That must be the case; or they'd be looking for him.

Four hostages, somewhere in this huge building. Six or more heavily armed terrorists. Himself, with the advantage. Impossible, crazy, Daunting. He could fail. Worse, he could die. He doesn't want to die.

Shaking his head, he pushes it away. He pushes it all away. Represses everything. Stops thinking, except of the moment. This moment. \_His\_ moment. Staggering to his feet at the foot of the stairs, he grasps his M4, swallows, and begins to climb. No need for the goggles. He'll merge with the darkness, use it as a weapon, as an ally. He's a member of the SAS now, and forever. Nothing else matters.

#### 4. Four, Sneak

Strange that in a time of such conflict, where many lives hang in the balance and time is of the essence; he can still appreciate the finer things. He's crouching on the walkway, trying to conceal his body within the dark and make as little noise as possible; yet the focus of his attention is the shining metal surface of his rifle. What little light exists in this dingy place slithers over the black in such a contrast; a trail of blood on a path of skin. The M4 was almost built in a climax of texture; starting off smooth and wide at the butt, becoming rough as he runs his hand up the side, over all the tiny buttons and crevices; becoming corrugated near the grip; before exploding into one sleek, final tube. Just point that tube in someone's direction and bangâ€¦ you can take a life.

In the darkness he waits. There's little else to do; at least, until they give him an opportunity. He's got to do this \_perfectly\_.

The clang of heavy boots on light metal resounds through the walkway, shaking it. This is it. Ready your rifle; adjust your footing. Strange how the gun feels somewhat heavier when you know where the next bullet's going. Clang. Clang. Almost at the crate now. He's almost by you. Your hiding place. This is it; you can see him. See his dull camo trousers, shifting leather jacket through the dark. He's passed. The back of his head. His footsteps merge with your heartbeat; posture mimicked by yourself. Victim and killer as one. You're right behind him. Twist the gun into his back so he realises in the last few moments of his life that he's been outsmarted.

Squeeze and make it all go away.

The silencer absorbed most of the gunshot; but he finds it harder to assume they didn't hear the slumping body. Crouched, he hurries to the doorway, trying to clean the blood from his gun. Smiles at this. He knows Macbeth; a gun, like hands, can never be cleaned. Or is a tool innocent? Doesn't matter now anyway; he's got to focus on the task at hand. It's been easy so far, but it could have been luck. There's no telling what's through this door. He bites his lip as the knob turns, hinge creaks.

Steps inside. It's just as dark.

The room's small; a door opposite his own leads back out onto the walkway; a window to his left overlooks the warehouse. It's pitch black but he's sure he can see one of his squad down there, lifeless. There's a table in the middle, and further right, there's two large doors- unknown behind. Wait- there's a body slumped over the table. He checksâ€¦ hostage? No. Alive. Breathing. Sleeping. He cracks the rifle butt against skull; checks again to be sure. Walks towards the two, ominous doors. Slowly rests his hand on one; nervously pushes. The slit of darkness widens. The door doesn't creak. Silence. Creep in.

Now this really is ridiculous; literally as black as coal. He runs his hand over the wall for a lightswitch, finds something. Pushes with his thumb. \_Whoosh,\_ the place lights up like a flashbang, his eyes hurt so he shields himself with a hand. Squinting, and through

extended fingers, he sees a shadowed face. No, a balaclava.  
Shitâ€|

"Who the fuckâ€|"

They both fire at the same time, bullets whizzing like firecrackers, smashing into desks and walls, exploding in clouds of paper, wood and plaster. He's falling sideways, a failing jump. Finger's clenching, relying on the rifle to protect him, his own guardian angel. Gunfire continues, blasting into his ears, before trailing off. Thump- he smacks into the ground, and after a second or two of nothing, the pain shoots up his left arm; breaks up like nerve endings; envelops his body quickly. It rushes to his mouth, and he screams.

Sense trickles back. Get up. For god's sake get up, he's probably still alive. Obey. He pushes down with his right arm; raising himself slowly; agonisingly. Knee slips under to take the weight. Other leg elongates; all the time rising. He's on his feet; grasps at his left arm when he realises it's bleeding. Raises his head; peers against the white glow. Three, no, four figures surround him- silhouetted against the light. He hobbles backwards; stumbles over. Lying on his ass, clenching his arm, he looks up and says

"Shit, don't kill me".

End  
file.